

Earth-Friendly Gardening & Landscaping

The GreenMan



Easy Orchids for Exotic Living

The frequent association of orchids with mist-shrouded jungle canopies has led to the common misconception that growing them poses too many problems. Fortunately, relocating to a remote tropical island or investing in a greenhouse are not prerequisites to enjoying these exotic, breathtaking and unique flowering plants. Anyone who can grow indoor flowering plants successfully will find scores of brilliant and affordable orchids to fit every situation and room in their home.

There are an estimated 30 to 40 thousand different species of orchids found in nature; the plant family's incredible popularity has led to the cloning and hybridization of more than a million different species. With such a vast universe, finding the right plant to match a living room's light level and wallpaper should not require a major expedition.

Over the years, orchid hobbyists and growers have found that several genera grow easily under normal indoor conditions. For the most part, lighting conditions similar to those required for African violets, such as bright east- or west-facing windows, or a shaded southern window with no direct sun, will be suitable for most orchids. Even a sunny, southern exposure filtered with sheer curtains can be appropriate for orchids requiring higher light levels.

Among the best plants for beginners with moderate light conditions are *Phalaenopsis*, *Paphiopedilum*, *Miltonia*,

and *Miltoniopsis*, with *Paphiopedilum* being the most tolerant of shady conditions, perhaps even a bright northern window. Somewhat brighter lighting conditions will be ideal for the showy and fragrant spectacle provided by *Dendrobiums*, *Cattleyas*, *Oncidiums*, and *Brassias*.

According to a survey by the American Orchid Society, the world's largest plant society, *Phalaenopsis* is America's favorite orchid. It is also considered the easiest to grow. *Phalaenopsis* is known as the moth orchid, because its sprays of wing-like blooms bear a striking resem-

blance to clusters of brilliantly colored moths perched upon a branch. Under proper indoor conditions, this native of tropical lowlands can provide blooms for up to eight months of the year, perhaps producing flower spikes twice each year.

Paphiopedilum is commonly called the Lady's-slipper orchid, thanks to its tell-tale flower pouches. It produces long-lasting flowers along an upright spike or stem. The blooms themselves can last up to 10 weeks and offer an array of pink, gold, white and lavender, often combined together in a single, stunning flower with darker shaded veins.



Cattleya are often larger plants with huge white, pink or purple blossoms, traditionally thought of as corsage flowers. Generally larger "cats" will bloom once a year, with flowers lasting up to three weeks, although some hybrids can last up to eight weeks under ideal conditions. The full-sized plant is often too large for most home conditions, but a number of miniature Cattleyas are available, often less than 10 inches tall. The mini-cats are known to flower twice a year, with blooms lasting up to one month. Both large and small versions are fragrant when the blossom is fully open.

If fragrance is important, one of the most sweetly scented orchids is *Oncidium 'Sharry Baby.'* This prolific blooming plant is sometimes called (and marketed) as the Chocolate Lover's Orchid. The one- to two-inch blooms, which can reportedly number more than 300 on a fully mature plant, are deep ruby red or mahogany and exude a rich and warm chocolate fragrance.

Brassias are among the most exotic looking orchids, although they are easy to grow and sometimes flower more than once a year. Commonly and aptly named the Spider Orchid, most of the popular hybrids produce hundreds of colorful spidery blooms on long, adventurous stems than can last up to one month.

Of course, there is more to raising any plant than simply picking out a pretty one and offering it a bright window. Many orchids come from tropical climates and prefer high humidity, usually anywhere from 50 to 60 percent or more, and sometimes up to 75 percent. Most homes usually remain in the 35 to 50 percent range during the winter.

In fact, with few exceptions, a great many orchid species are epiphytes,

meaning that they live on or above a plant, usually in trees, and obtain moisture from the air itself, or from rainfall running down the sides of their host plants. Short of hosing down your living room on a daily basis, potential orchid growers will have to increase the humidity around their plants using some form of humidity tray. Daily misting is generally insufficient and frequently impractical.

Perhaps the simplest of humidity trays is a pan, even a cookie sheet, filled with pea gravel or pebbles. Orchids are placed on overturned saucers set atop the pebbles, so that the orchid's pot is never sitting in water. Water should be added to cover the pebbles on a regular basis, and replaced periodically. Evaporation from the pebbles will create a lush, humid environment around the plants - without turning the rest of the home into a sauna.

In addition to humidity, orchids require watering and feeding. Many of these tropical transplants are used to rainforest conditions, where they receive intermittent downpours, and so generally prefer a period where their growing medium is almost allowed to dry out between waterings. However, orchids should never be allowed to sit in soggy pots, which can lead to root rot and other diseases. Also, watering and misting should take place in the morning, allowing leaves to dry before nightfall.

The growing medium itself is important. Many orchids are adapted to grow in soil-free conditions, which is why the majority of epiphytic species are cultivated in specialized orchid mixtures, usually consisting of varying grades of fir bark, poultry peat, perlite and other additives. These beautiful tree huggers also obtain nutrients from debris washing over or

falling onto their roots, and consequently will require frequent dilute feedings, from biweekly to monthly, depending on the individual plant and time of year.

Air must be able to move around the plants readily, much like those balmy tropical breezes. Should a number of plants be grouped together in a corner, a ceiling fan or a small tabletop fan, operating at a slow speed, would be just enough to keep the air circulating.

Naturally, the actual culture and care for each species of orchid is different with respect to potting media, feeding and humidity. A conscientious grower or vendor will readily supply directions. Before purchasing that first, towering *Dendrobium*, canes waving aloft with large, brilliant sprays of flowers, contacting an accomplished orchid grower or visiting a public orchid show would be helpful. While many orchids will be perfect for an individual's conditions, other genera, like *Cymbidium*, simply require too much dedication.

Gardeners in the metropolitan area can easily become involved with kindred spirits anxious to share their knowledge and experience through either the Maryland Orchid Society, which meets in Baltimore, or the National Capital Orchid Society, Inc., which meets at the National Arboretum. There are also spectacular public displays at the newly renovated U.S. Botanic Garden in the District and at Brookside Gardens in Wheaton, in addition to orchid shows, auctions, and classes held locally several times a year.

There are few locations around, shy of more tropical climes (or jungles), where a novice orchid grower can hope to learn more about orchids, or just appreciate them.



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